Understanding the Diversity of FE Learners:
A Collaborative Approach to Segmentation
NERUPI Convention

September 2025

Introduction to Cosmos

Cosmos work in the education sector and we work with universities to improve access, progression and success outcomes for students - who to target, what support they need, and how to deliver it effectively

Insights showing exactly which students need what kind of support

Solutions built from research conducted with 100,00+ students

Develop digital tools for educators

Award Winning Projects

Gold Innovation Award Golden Apple Awards

Finalist Innovation Award Educate North

Finalist DEI Award Educate North

Our partners: HEIs, schools, colleges / sixth forms, local authorities

We believe that a student's potential should not be limited by their postcode and at Cosmos we were the young people we work with

National scope

What to expect:

- Study framing & collaborative partners

- Collaborative approach & reflections

- Insights 35,000 FE students: Four FE student segments

- Case Study: How one team used segmentation to boost HE progression by 22% in a year

- Our new mission & free gift

What we heard from the sector
(and continue to hear . . .)

FE SEGMENTATION

Context to the project:
- 35,000 FE students - nationally
- 9 Uni Connect networks
- **Core objective**: wanted to find a way to target interventions where it is most needed for FE students

1. **Being asked to deliver more with less.**

2. **Limited insight into what works - and for whom.**

3. **Provision often shaped by partner needs, not strategy.**

4. **Difficulty recruiting certain subgroups**

5. **Tough decisions about where to scale back.**

Common Missteps with FE Students

1. Using postcode or demographic groupings as a proxy for student need.

2. Lifting interventions that worked in schools and applying them to FE without adaptation.

3. Repeating the same provision annually - hoping for different results.

4. Assuming all FE learners need the same support - leading to one-size-fits-all delivery.

5. Tracking overall engagement , but not not specific impact.

Study Partners

PATHWAYS

happSY

inspiring choices
York & North Yorkshire

GO HIGHER
West Yorkshire

MAKE
—
HAPPEN

Next Steps
South West

hello future.

HOP
HUMBER OUTREACH PROGRAMME

SUN SOUTHERN UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

FE SEGMENTATION

Collaboration Reflections

Practical Benefits of Collaboration
Cost-efficiency
Shared infrastructure
Efficiency of effort

Sector Impact
Scalability
Credibility
Leverage

Cultural Value of Collaboration
Collective learning
Stronger sector relationships
Amplified student voice

Shared design / ownership

Balancing national vs local needs

Infrastructure as enabler

Challenges
Different institutional priorities and timelines
Balancing local context with national comparability

Essentials for future partnerships
Clear shared purpose from the outset
Infrastructure to support collaboration (e.g. portal, scheduled check-ins)
Willingness to compromise, co-create, and stay student-centred

Let's meet the FE Student Segments…

SEGMENTATION

High level overview of the segments identified based on the analysis of over 35k student surveys*

FE SEGMENTATION

HE Confident

27% of FE students

Highly confident and knowledgeable about HE; on track to study at HE

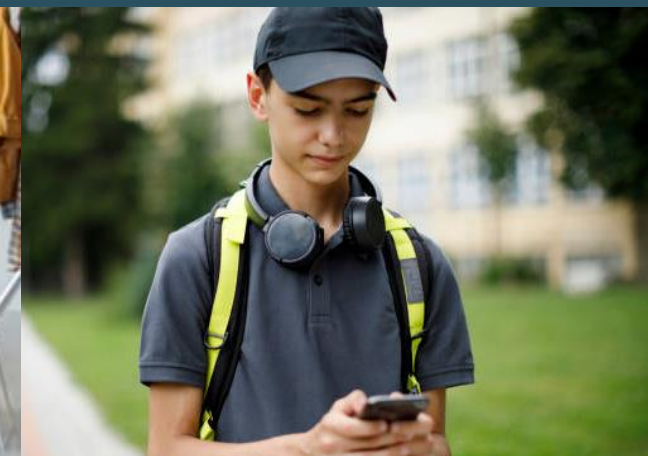## HE Hopeful

18% of FE students

Quite confident about wanting to study at HE, but are lacking knowledge

HE Maybe

26% of FE students

Poor knowledge about HE and needing reassurance whether HE is for them

HE Sceptics

19% of FE students

Lacking motivation and HE knowledge; fairly convinced HE is not for them

HE Confident
Overview

SIZE

27%

OPENNESS TO HE

VERY HIGH

KEY PROFILING INFORMATION

- A mix of Males and Females
- Representative in terms of ethnicity
- Slightly older (19 y.o.)
- Often in the last year of the Sixth Form
- Most likely of the segments to have **family who have been to HE**
- More likely to **currently study more 'traditional' subjects** (e.g. Science, Social Science, Maths, History, English)

"*I know what I want to do and I have what it takes to succeed. I'm confident about my choices, but a sounding board would be useful*"

CONFIDENCE AND MOTIVATION

Highly motivated to do well and the most confident of the segments about their academic abilities (reflected in their overall **higher GCSE** and **expected A level grades**).

See themselves as highly suited for HE.

HE BENEFITS

Strong believers in the benefits of HE but are somewhat **less 'wowed'** by it compared to HE Hopeful, are more likely to see HE as a given.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HE

Highly knowledgeable about HE, particularly the aspects related to applying as they are more likely to have applied already or looking to apply.

The **most confident of all segments** about their next steps after current studies (85%).

SUPPORT NEEDS

Helping them to **smoothly transition into HE and settle** in, e.g. information about student life, accommodation options, student finances.

Future careers advice/ helping them to discover professions they can pursue with the degrees they are considering/ have chosen.

HE Hopeful
Overview

SIZE

18%

OPENNESS TO HE

HIGH

KEY PROFILING INFORMATION

- A mix of Males and Females
- Representative in terms of ethnicity, with a **mild BAME skew**
- Slightly younger (17 y.o. or less)
- Typically in the penultimate year of the Sixth Form or in Level 3 College
- **Average likelihood to have family in HE**
- More likely than other segments to be currently studying **Arts/ Design and Law**

> " *I feel like I know what I want to do and I feel confident I can succeed. I want to go into HE, but I still need to do a lot of research about it* "

CONFIDENCE AND MOTIVATION

Highly motivated to do well and very **confident in their academic abilities** (reflected in their second highest GCSE and expected A level grades).

See themselves as highly suited for HE.

HE BENEFITS

The **strongest believers in the benefits of HE** of the segments and are particularly **more likely to link HE to better jobs, higher earning** and and **improved social life**.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HE

Are **somewhat lacking knowledge about HE** – including the topics that are useful to learn about early on. This could be due to the stage in their education journey (slightly earlier on compared to HE Confident).

Have **average (61%) level of confidence** about next steps after current studies.

SUPPORT NEEDS

Helping them to **understand what pathway is best for them** and **guiding them through the steps of getting there** (e.g. support with the subjects/ qualifications needed, application process).

Future careers advice/ helping them to discover professions they can pursue based on the subjects they like/ are good at.

HE Maybe
Overview

SIZE

26%

OPENNESS TO HE

MEDIUM-HIGH

KEY PROFILING INFORMATION

- A mix of Males and Females
- Representative in terms of ethnicity
- Slightly younger (17 y.o. or less)
- More likely to be in Year 12 of Sixth Form or Level 1 of College
- Slightly less likely to have family in HE
- More likely than other segments to be (interested in) studying **Health/ Social care**

> " *I want to do well and would like to go into Higher Education, but I'm not sure it'll be a good fit for me... There's a lot I still don't know about HE* "

CONFIDENCE AND MOTIVATION

Quite motivated to do well in studies, but are **somewhat doubtful about their academic abilities**, (reflected in their lower GCSE and expected A level grades compared to HE Confident and HE Hopeful).

Uncertain about their suitability for HE.

HE BENEFITS

Are **likely to recognise the benefits of HE** but are **less certain** about those compared to HE Confident and HE Hopeful.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HE

Are the **least knowledgeable of the segments** in terms of all aspects related to HE, **including such essential areas** as qualifications and grades needed, costs, subjects available and how to apply. This could partially be due to their stage in the education journey (slightly earlier on).

Have **average (62%) level of confidence** about next steps after current studies.

SUPPORT NEEDS

Helping them to **discover options available** (whilst ensuring they understand the benefits of HE), identify those that are best suited based on their interests and **guiding them through the process.**
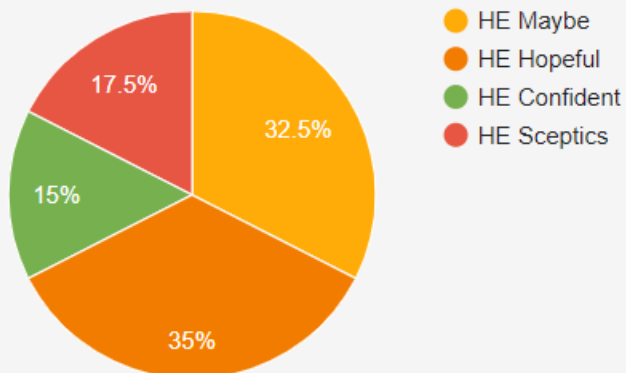
Future careers advice/ helping them to discover professions they might be suited to based on their interests and abilities/ strengths.
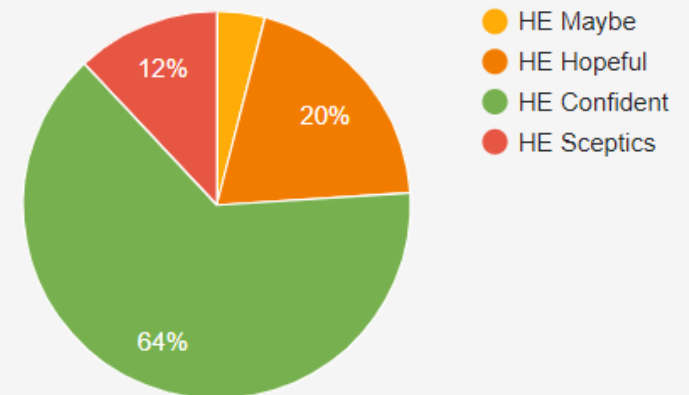
HE Sceptics
Overview

SIZE

19%

OPENNESS TO HE
LOW

> *"I'd like to do well in my current studies, but I'm not sure if HE is the right pathway for me. I don't think it'll be that beneficial or suited to me"*

KEY PROFILING INFORMATION

- A mix of Males and Females, with a mild **skew towards Males**
- Slightly more likely to identify as White
- Slightly older (19 y.o. or older)
- Often in the last year of Sixth Form or College
- **Less likely to have family in HE**
- More likely to be into **practical subjects** (e.g. Business, Art/ Design, Engineering)

CONFIDENCE AND MOTIVATION

The **least motivated of the segments** and **most doubtful about their academic abilities** (which is also reflected in the lowest GCSE and expected A level grades compared to the other three segments).

Strongly doubt their fit with HE.

HE BENEFITS

Are the **least likely of the segments to believe in the benefits of HE**, including that it'll enable them to get better jobs and have better earnings.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HE

They are **lacking knowledge about HE** but **know more compared to HE Maybe**, which could be a factor of them being slightly older/ further down in their education journey.

They are the **most uncertain segment** when it comes to next steps after current studies.

SUPPORT NEEDS

Helping them to **understand the benefits of HE** and **accurately assess their suitability.**
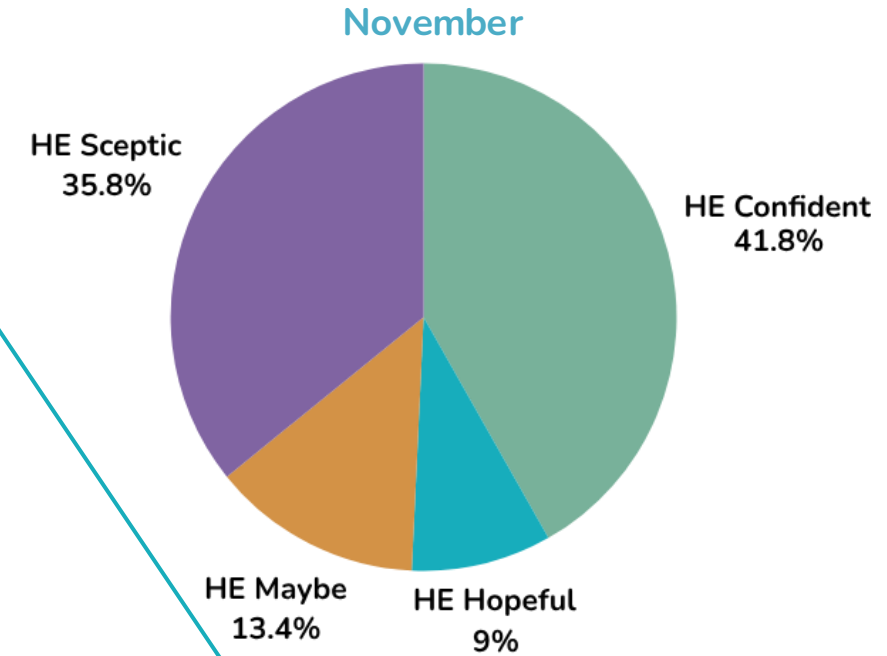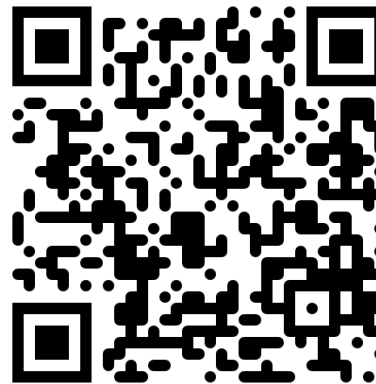
If HE isn't the most suitable option, helping them to **identify the best alternatives** based on their interests and abilities/ strengths, and guiding them towards those.

Future careers advice/ helping them to identify potential jobs they could pursue based on their interests and strengths.

Askham Bryan College: Segmentation Profile

April

HE Confident 27.7%
HE Sceptic 42.6%
HE Hopeful 11%
HE Maybe 18.7%
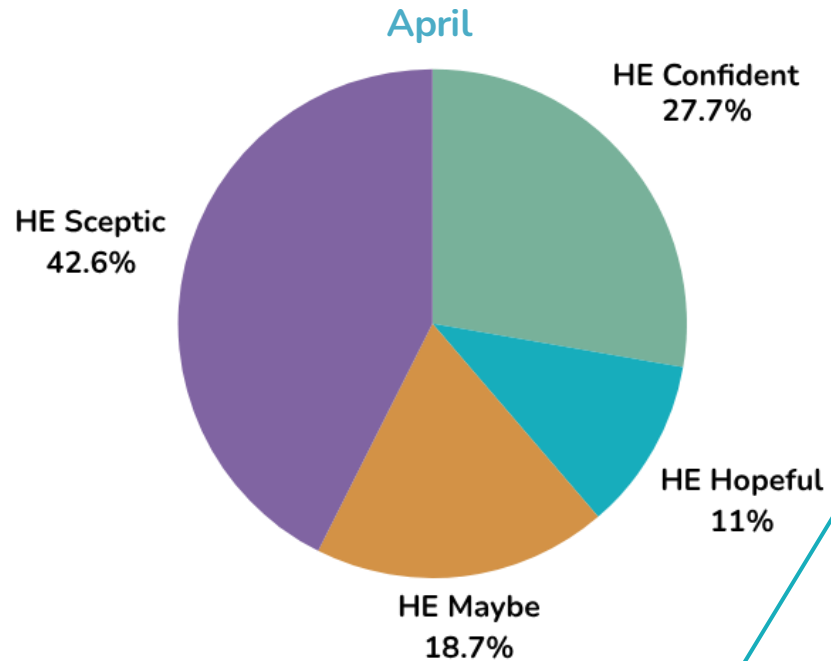
Watch the Askham Bryan College case study

November

HE Sceptic 35.8%
HE Confident 41.8%
HE Maybe 13.4%
HE Hopeful 9%

CASE STUDY DEEP DIVE

How one team used segmentation to boost HE progression by 22% in a year

FE SEGMENTATION

Case Study Deep Dive

FE SEGMENTATION

How one team used segmentation to redeploy staff and budget for greater impact - and saw HE progression rise by 22% in just one year.

Context:

A widening participation team at a mid-sized university was delivering a **wide range of outreach activities across several FE colleges** in their region. Despite strong delivery numbers, the data told a different story:

- **Progression rates** from priority cohorts **remained flat**
- Some colleges showed **persistently low engagement**
- It was **hard to evidence** which activities were truly working

Current Activity:

The team had ambition but lacked insight.

They were putting in the hours, but **couldn't confidently s**ay which students they were reaching, **what was resonating**, or **how to adapt**.

Activities were **well-meaning but broad-brush.** FE partners were asking for **more personalised support**, but **capacity was tight**.

Case Study Deep Dive

What Changed:

They adopted the **implemented the FE Diagnostic Tool**, which revealed the dominant mindsets across their partner colleges: **HE Sceptic**, **HE Maybe**, **HE Hopeful**, and **HE Confident** learners - each requiring a different approach to move forward.

With this intelligence, they made five key shifts:

1. **Sharpened their focus**
   Aligned their strategy around increasing progression from colleges with **high proportions of 2 key segments**

2. **Mapped the baseline**
   Profiled six partner colleges. One had high % of **HE Confident** students needing tailored support with competitive admissions. Others had **HE Sceptic** learners needing earlier, confidence-building work.

3. **Redesigned the activity offer**
   Created **tiered activity pathways** mapped to mindset. "Hopeful" learners received intensive IAG, parental sessions, and relatable role models. "Confident" learners got subject tasters and personal statement masterclasses.

Case Study Deep Dive

"It's the first time we've been able to say with confidence: *this works for this group.*"
– Access & Participation Lead,

With this intelligence, they made five key shifts:

4. Refined targeting and comms
Communications were updated to speak to each segment's motivations and hesitations. For example, **"HE Maybe" learners received personalised follow-up after campus visits** - while **"HE Sceptics" were offered peer mentoring** and employer-led sessions to reframe relevance.

5. Measured what mattered
Data collection evolved: **engagement, feedback, and outcomes were disaggregated by mindset**. This enabled in-year adaptation - and clear impact reporting to senior leaders.

The Outcome:
- A **22% uplift in HE progression** from their most underrepresented FE college in just one year

- More **strategic deployment of staff and budget -** with less duplication and greater impact

- **Strengthened trust with college partners**, who described the approach as "targeted, responsive and human"

- A **new level of confidence among senior leaders** that outreach was **evidence-based, needs-led and working**

"Our goal is to see 50,000 FE learners become "HE Confidents" over the next five years."

NEXT STEPS: FREE ASSESMENT

We are offering a **free segmentation assessment for one cohort at your institution** (up to 50 students) for today's attendees.

Why?

Because we want to see more HE Confident students and more progression - activities targeted at those who need it most. We have confidence in this method.

Scan the code and enter your details

Free FE Segmentation Assesment - Sign Up

How people engage with us..

- Free resources | Subscribe to our newsletter | Listen to our podcast | LinkedIn
- Subscription – tools & platforms
- Bespoke commissions – research & delivery

Questions & Discussion . . .

Thank you

COSMOS
Nexus, University of Leeds,
Discovery Way, Leeds LS2 3AA

T | 0113 887 0191
W | www.cosmosltd.uk
E | hello@cosmosltd.uk

FE SEGMENTATION